

# Issues Surrounding the *Prajñāpāramitā-hṛdaya*: Doubts Concerning Jan Nattier’s Theory of a Composition by Xuanzang<sup>1</sup>

Ishii Kōsei 石井公成 (Komazawa University)

Translated by Jeffrey Kotyk (Leiden University)

## 1. Introduction

Jan Nattier (1992) published a paper on the Sanskrit *Prajñāpāramitā-hṛdaya* (i.e., the *Heart Sūtra*, hereafter *Hṛdaya*), which became a hot topic of discussion, arguing that there is a likely possibility that Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664), who was apparently aware that this Chinese scripture had been produced as extractions from the Chinese *Da pin bore* 大品般若 (T 223), made some small editorial revisions to it after having fully learnt Sanskrit in India, and then translated it into Sanskrit. Nattier is a researcher who has presented a great amount of superb research concerning early period Mahāyāna Buddhism. In the case of the aforementioned paper, it also has beneficial aspects, as she points out a great many features of the *Hṛdaya*. However, in addition to a number of points already known in Japan, Fukui Fumimasa 福井文雅 (2000) and Harada Wasō 原田和宗 (2010) have pointed out in detail that the argument suggesting that Xuanzang produced the Sanskrit *Hṛdaya* is overstated and mistaken. Elsewhere, there are many researchers who are critical of Nattier’s theory, including some in the West. There are, however, no papers written in English that directly refute her theory, which is why it seems that Western scholars of Buddhist Studies, who are not specialists in this respect, as well as the majority of general readers with an interest in Buddhism, have until now seen Nattier’s theory as a prevailing view, and consulted her paper. The present paper, therefore, hopes to point out a number of problematic points in Nattier’s theory from a perspective different from the criticisms to date.

## 2. “The five aggregates were all perceived to be empty.” 照見五蘊皆空

---

<sup>1</sup> Originally published in Japanese as Ishii Kōsei 石井公成, “‘*Hannya shingyō*’ wo meguru shomondai – Jan Nattier no Genjō sōsaku-setsu wo utagau” 『般若心経』をめぐる諸問題：ジャン・ナティエ氏の玄奘創作説を疑う, *Indogaku Bukkyōgaku kenkyū* 印度學佛教學研究 64, no. 1 (2015): 499–492.

Nattier states that researchers of Buddhism, having become too familiar with the *Hṛdaya*, feel nothing unusual about it, yet the Sanskrit text of the *Hṛdaya* (short recension) is quite unusual in character as a Prajñāpāramitā scripture. For instance, in contrast to the tendency of Prajñāpāramitā scriptures to become enlarged, the *Hṛdaya* is uniquely shortened. Moreover, it does not take the form of a scripture in which the Buddha makes an appearance, while Avalokiteśvara, who possesses a weak relation to Prajñāpāramitā scriptures, is the main character. The *Hṛdaya* abruptly ends with a mantra. In addition to many parts in which the vocabulary and grammar differ from Sanskrit Prajñāpāramitā scriptures, there are also unnatural expressions of Sanskrit, and some parts only correspond to Chinese scriptural translations. Also, the commentaries for the large recension of the *Hṛdaya* were produced at a later time than those of the short recension in Chinese translation.

As a result of these points, Nattier has argued that the Chinese *Hṛdaya* was produced in China after having been extracted from the Chinese translation of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, after which it was edited slightly by Xuanzang, who then translated it into Sanskrit, resulting in it becoming known in India. An especially important basis for this argument is the point that “it is easier to understand the Sanskrit *Heart Sūtra* as a translation from Chinese than the reverse (Nattier 1992, 178).”

However, if the Chinese *Hṛdaya* was rendered into Sanskrit, would it have become like the extant text? In actuality, there are several examples of evidence to the contrary. For example, this is the case with the part that reads “the five aggregates were all perceived to be empty” (照見五蘊皆空).

Nattier at the beginning of her paper explains that the short recension of the *Hṛdaya* is comprised of three parts, including a brief introduction, a core, and a conclusion, and then presents an English translation of the Sanskrit text. The relevant part from the beginning of the sūtra is translated as follows:

The *bodhisattva* Noble Avalokiteśvara, practicing [his] practice in the profound Perfection of Wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*), looked down (*vyavalokayatisma*). [And] he regarded the five *skandhas* as empty (Nattier 1992, 155).

In actuality, this is closer to an English translation of the Chinese *Hṛdaya*, rather than a translation of the Sanskrit text. This is to say that Nattier has presented an English translation of

the so-called Sanskrit text in a form closer to the Chinese translation, and then explained that “it is easier to understand the Sanskrit *Heart Sūtra* as a translation from Chinese than the reverse.” There are several other examples of this.

Among the various manuscripts and critical editions of the Sanskrit text, which one exactly was used as the basis for this English translation? It is problematic that Nattier does not clearly indicate this. Here I will cite the critical text of Max Müller and Bunyiu Nanjio, which has been widely read, and greatly influenced researchers of various countries. The transcription has been reformatted into passage form:

āryāvalokiteśvaro bodhisattvo gaṃbhīrāyāṃ prajñāpāramitāyāṃ caryāṃ caramāṇo  
vyavalokayati sma | pañca skandhās tāṃś ca svabhāvaśūnyān paśyati sma | (Müller and  
Nanjio 1884, 48)

Extant Sanskrit manuscripts of the *Hṛdaya* – not only the critically edited text of Müller and Nanjio – all read “svabhāvaśūnyān” (“empty of self-nature”), but Nattier ignores that *svabhāva* (“self-nature”) is inserted, and translates without annotation the passage in a form that aligns with the Chinese translation, which itself lacks a term corresponding to *svabhāva*. Moreover, the above part in the Chinese *Hṛdaya* carries on with a line reading “... and crossed beyond all suffering” (度一切苦厄), yet this is never addressed in the paper. There are no terms among the various Sanskrit editions and Tibetan translations that correspond to “... and crossed beyond all suffering.” Also, in the edition “revealed by Avalokiteśvara” (觀音親授本) there is no part corresponding to this. It reads “娑嚩自 婆嚩引性 戌儺焰二合” (T 256, vol. 8: 851b27). The reason for *svabhāva* (娑嚩婆嚩) being present here ought to be explained.

With respect to the Chinese translations of the larger recension, the translation by Fayue 法月 reads “perceived the self-nature of the five aggregates as all empty” (照見五蘊自性皆空; T 252, vol. 8: 849a21). The translation by Prajñācakra 智慧輪 reads “perceived the self-nature of five aggregates as all empty” (照見五蘊自性皆空; T 254, vol. 8: 850a14). The translation by Facheng 法成 reads “observed and perceived the inherent nature of all the five aggregates as empty” (觀察照見五蘊體性悉皆是空; T 255, vol. 8: 850b27). The translation by Dānapāla 施護 reads “the self-nature of the five aggregates as all empty” (五蘊自性皆空; T 257, vol. 8: 852b13). These all translate *svabhāva* into Chinese, and moreover do not include the phrase “... and crossed beyond all suffering.” The exception to this is the translation by Prajñā 般若 and Liyan 利言, in which we find “perceived the five aggregates as all empty, and became free of

sufferings” (照見五蘊皆空, 離諸苦厄; T 253, no. 8: 849b29-c1), which is the same as Xuanzang’s translation. The translation by Prajñā and Liyan, therefore, is either based on the same Sanskrit recension on which Xuanzang’s was also based, or the pair perhaps esteemed Xuanzang’s translation, and produced their own Chinese translation in line with it.

What is important here is that in contrast to all the Chinese translations that translate “the five aggregates were all perceived to be empty” as a combined operation, in the case of the Sanskrit texts, no matter the recension, they all comprise a structure of two levels: “There are five aggregates, and they were all perceived to be empty.” There is no change even when the interpretation of this passage is divided into three points: to where does “vyavalokayati” extend? How do we interpret “svabhāva”? Whom do we regard as the subject of “paśyati”? In actuality, although researchers before Nattier differed subtly in their respective interpretations of these three points, there are still many cases in which they translated the passage in question into two levels, which is in contrast to Nattier. For example, the English translation of the above Sanskrit by Max Müller and Bunyiu Nanjio reads as follows:

Avolokiteśvara [*sic*] ... thought thus: ‘There are five Skandhas, and these he considered as by their nature empty (phenomenal).’ (Müller and Nanjio 1884, 48)

In this way of dividing the text, if the subject of “paśyati” is seen to be Avalokiteśvara, then the flow of the text perhaps becomes unnatural. Müller and Nanjio explained that they thought this referred to someone other than Avalokiteśvara as the subject, and translated the reference as “he”. Fujita Shindō (1940) agreed with this, and interpreted this as referring to the Buddha.

Next, the translation of Edward Conze, whom Nattier cites at the beginning of her paper, is as follows:

He looked down from on high, he beheld but five heaps, and he saw that in their own-being they were empty (Conze 1958, 77).

Nattier also makes use of Japanese research papers, but with respect to translations of the *Hṛdaya* by Japanese researchers, although there are some individuals who translate this passage into one

line in accordance with the Chinese translation, there are many people who translate the passage into two stages, such as the widely read translation by Nakamura Hajime and Kino Kazuyoshi.<sup>2</sup>

Here, as a method of considering whether in this part the Sanskrit or the Chinese constitutes the original, we might translate the Sanskrit following the sequence of the Chinese translation.<sup>3</sup> First, having read out the Sanskrit, and then displaying how the *sandhi* is divided, we can replace each word with Chinese characters.

vyavalokayati sma pañca skandhās tāṃś ca svabhāvaśūnyān paśyati sma

照 了 五 蘊 此等 而 自性 空 見 了

vy-ava-√lok means to observe something with deep attention. Here, we use the character 照, since it is observation with the wisdom of *prajñā*. Since √paś is a word used for the act of general seeing, we insert the character 見. Next, if we omit particles such as 了, and terms such as 此等, which are understood from the context even without being stated, the passage becomes 照五蘊而自性空見. However, it would be unusual for the verb 見 to come after the object. The syntax becomes odd if 而 is inserted here. If the syntax is rearranged into four characters, the sentence becomes 照於五蘊, 見自性空. If we turn it to 照五蘊, and consider the syntax, it would become 照五蘊, 見性空. If “emptiness” is emphasized, then it becomes 見皆空. If still this is insufficiently smooth, the terms 照, 見, 五蘊 and 皆空 can be combined to form the phrase 照見五蘊皆空. If 照五蘊而見自性空, which has a bad composure, is changed to 照見五蘊自性空, and we further consider the rhythm, it would further be modified to 照見五蘊皆空.

In the Chinese canon, the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra* 華嚴經 uses the term 照見 (“perceive”) in the passage “... perceived by the pure eyes of the bodhisattva 菩薩淨眼之所照見” (T 278, vol. 9: 497b11). As in the *Buddhacarita* 佛所行讚, which gives “... the divine eye perceiving all in the world without [any limitations of] distance 世間無遠近天眼悉照見” (T 192, vol. 4: 51b11), this term is used often in cases when perceiving something with wisdom and special powers. It is thus appropriate to use this Chinese term as a translation of *vyavalokayati*, which includes a nuance of observing something in detail. However, although 見 (“to see”) – identical to the

---

<sup>2</sup> 「存在するものには五つの構成要素があるとみききわめた。しかも、かれは、これらの構成要素が、その本性からいうと、実態のないものであると見抜いたのであった。」 (Nakamura and Kino 1960, 11).

<sup>3</sup> For the sequence of the Chinese translation, including the example from the *Hṛdaya*, see Funayama (2013).

corresponding *paśyati* – is a general word meaning “to see”, according to Harada (2010, 91), *paśyati* in Prajñāpāramitā scriptures is often used in a negating form, in which “the bodhisattva does not see X.”

The *Prajñāpāramitā-hṛdaya* is definitely of a different quality in that sense as a Prajñāpāramitā sūtra, but as the name suggests, it was originally not a sūtra. The *Hṛdaya* takes Avalokiteśvara, who is otherwise remotely connected to Prajñāpāramitā literature, as the main character, as well as advocating recitation of a mantra. In addition, if we consider that, in actuality, there are many cases where it was used as a protective charm, we should think of the text as a hybrid work, in which the original author in such a position focused on the mantra of *prajñā*, which is none other than potent “true language” (*satya-vacana*), while utilizing the cult of Avalokiteśvara, and other elements derived from Prajñāpāramitā sūtras.

As examples of such diverse elements, although the structure of “vyavalokayati ... paśyati sma” is not seen in *Prajñāpāramitā* scriptures, in the *Lalitavistara*, when the bodhisattva (Śākyamuni) observes the world when having just been born, the structure of “vyavalokayati sma ... paśyati sma” is employed. Moreover, as Harada points out,<sup>4</sup> the object of *vyavalokayati* is not an object noun, and like the *Hṛdaya*, there are places in which nouns in the nominative case without the accompanying *iti* become the subject. The *Hṛdaya* superposes the practice of Avalokiteśvara onto this sort of depiction.

In any case, if the Chinese line of 照見五蘊皆空, which never appears in Chinese Prajñāpāramitā literature until the Chinese *Hṛdaya*, is translated into Sanskrit, would it be put into Sanskrit that displays the two stages of action as seen above? It would be natural to translate it into a single-stage sentence in a way that reads, “The five aggregates were all observed to be empty.” There are also no examples of the lines 五蘊皆空 and 蘊皆空 in Chinese translations before the *Hṛdaya*. Furthermore, the expressions “五蘊○空” and “五蘊○○空” are also not seen in sūtras and śāstras translated into China before the *Hṛdaya*.

What is unusual is that the *Bore boluomiduo xin jing youzan* 般若波羅蜜多心經幽贊 by monk Ji 基 (632–682) cites the line in question as follows, but using the plural suffix of *deng* 等: “經曰: 照見五蘊等皆空 (T 1710, vol. 33: 535b10).” It is for this reason perhaps that even today at Hōryū-ji 法隆寺, which transmits the traditions of Hossō-shū 法相宗, this version with the

---

<sup>4</sup> See Harada (2010, 99-101). In the same work, it is inferred that “svabhāva” was not in the Sanskrit text translated by Xuanzang.

plural suffix is recited every morning. It does not appear that Ji could handle Sanskrit with confidence, and in the case of the *Hṛdaya*, he never refers to the Sanskrit, nor does it appear that he looked at it. As the foremost disciple of Xuanzang, it is doubtful that he would have used a source text different from the text published at Ci'en-si 慈恩寺.

Woncheuk 圓測 (613–696), who was proficient in Sanskrit, wrote his commentary, the *Bore boluomiduo xinjing zan* 般若波羅蜜多心經贊, after having examined the Sanskrit *Hṛdaya*. With respect to the line 五蘊皆空, he explains that some versions include the plural suffix *deng* 等 (或有本曰照見五蘊等皆空), and states that this it was correct to insert this word in the translation, given that upon investigating the Sanskrit version, he found the equivalent term (雖有兩本, 後本爲正, 檢勘梵本, 有等言故, 後所說等, 準此應知; T 1711, vol. 33: 544c12-14). With respect to that equivalent term, among the extant Sanskrit versions there is no term such as *ādi*, so *deng* is perhaps referring to *skandhāḥ* and *tāmś* in their plural forms. In the aforementioned *Da pin bore*, the expression 以色蘊等自性皆空 appears (T 220, vol. 5: 552c24), but there is but one example of this, and moreover it appears that *deng* was added in order to make a four-character line.

Furthermore, Woncheuk, in the same way as Ji, never mentions the difference between the Chinese and Sanskrit in being comprised of one and two stages respectively, nor the status of *svabhāva*. Woncheuk's commentary concerns the *Hṛdaya* as a Chinese translation by Xuanzang, which possessed the foremost authority in China, and was prized by Emperor Taizong 太宗 (r. 976–997), which is why there might have been some reservation on the part of Woncheuk, but when he did look at the Sanskrit, it seems it would have been acceptable to touch on the major differences.

What is quite interesting is the *Bore boluomiduo xin jing lüeshu* 般若波羅蜜多心經略疏 by Fazang 法藏 (643–712). Fazang, who occasionally refers to Sanskrit also in his commentaries on the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*, explains 照見五蘊皆空 as follows: “Thoroughly observing the self-nature of all the five aggregates as empty' refers to the principle of the two types of emptiness observed by profound wisdom. 謂達見五蘊自性皆空, 即二空理, 深慧所見也 (T 1712, vol. 33: 552c25-26).” It appears that he was taking into consideration *svabhāva* in the Sanskrit text, but the four-character line of 自性皆空 is a common phrase in Chinese Buddhist translations. Here, it appears, I believe, that he used this common phrase in order to form a string of four characters.

### 3. “True and not false.” 真實不虛

There is a point in the commentaries of Fazang, Ji and Woncheuk that differs from the extant Sanskrit versions of the *Hṛdaya*. This point becomes problematic if we assume that Xuanzang translated the Chinese *Hṛdaya* into Sanskrit. This is the part at the end of the sūtra that reads, “It is true and not false; thus, the mantra of *prajñāpāramitā* is spoken 真實不虛故說般若波羅蜜多呪.” Ji, Woncheuk and Fazang all stop at “true and not false 真實不虛” and then continue from “... thus, the mantra of *prajñāpāramitā* is spoken 故說般若波羅蜜多.” Most of the extant Sanskrit manuscripts, however, read as follows:

satyam amithyatvāt, prajñāpāramitāyām ukto mantrah.

This is a singular sentence explaining a reason: “It is true. Because it is not false.” The text continues from this point: “A mantra is spoken with the meaning of [within] *prajñāpāramitā*.” There are various explanations for why *prajñāpāramitāyām* is in the locative case, but with respect to “satyam amithyatvāt”, the fact that almost all the Sanskrit recensions, both the long and short, have this line cannot be ignored. Nattier translates the Sanskrit here as follows:

Because it is true, not false (*satyam amithyatvāt* [sic]), the mantra is spoken in the Perfection of Wisdom (Nattier 1992, 156).

This is an English translation in line with the Chinese translation of the *Hṛdaya* that is understood according to an interpretation in which “true and not false 真實不虛” is cut off from the subsequent line. Moreover, here it appears that she inserts “[sic]” under the assumption that “satyam amithyatvāt” is mistaken Sanskrit, in the same way as earlier (Ibid., 155), when she problematically deals with the assumption that *ca* was neglected in the text, and therefore assumed the need to insert “[and]”. With respect to this, Nattier states, “When the text tells us, for example that the mantra is ‘genuine, not vain’ [真實不虛], the wording is entirely natural in Chinese, while its Sanskrit counterpart *satyam amithyatvāt* [sic] ... has perplexed a number of modern readers (Ibid., 177–178).” However, the above Sanskrit that Xuanzang translated as 真實不虛故說般若波羅蜜多呪 was understood by Chinese readers as having a stop after 真實不虛, before continuing with the subsequent line, or otherwise understanding the stop to come after 真實不虛故 (with the meaning “because it is true and not false”). Would the whole Chinese line have been translated as peculiar Sanskrit as Nattier suggests? Moreover, the Chinese of “speak



the mantra of *prajñāpāramitā* 說般若波羅蜜多呪” takes a simple form, which completely differs in context from the Sanskrit.

With respect to the *dhāraṇī*, as Harada (2010, 340) points out, there exist many examples of “true and not false” (真實不虛) or similar expressions, but *satyam amithyatvāt* in the form of a sentence explaining a reason is a unique usage that is never found in other Sanskrit sūtras, including *Prajñāpāramitā* sūtras. The combination of “true” (真實) and “not false” (不虛) or “true” (如實) and “not false” (不虛) is a common expression frequently seen outside of even *dhāraṇī* sūtras in Chinese. For example, in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* 大般涅槃經, there is a line that reads, “It is true, and not false 即是真實, 非虛妄也 (T 374, vol. 12: 458c19).” Among the examples of “true and not false” (真實不虛), the one I believe to be extremely important is found in a passage in the *Jin’gang xian lun* 金剛仙論, which is inferred to be a work of Bodhiruci 菩提流支 (?–527). In order to explain the passage in the *Jin’gang bore jing* 金剛般若經 (T 236, vol. 8: 754c15), translated by Bodhiruci, that states that the Tathāgata is “one who speaks truth 真語者” (*satya-vādin*), the *Jin’gang xian* gives the following explanation:

「須菩提, 如來是真語者」 明如來是一切智人, 證得果頭十力無畏諸功德等, 如已所證, 還爲人說, 如實不虛, 故云真語者也。

“Subhūti! The Tathāgata is one who speaks truth.” [This] explains that the Tathāgata is someone possessing omniscience, having realized various merits such as the peak result, the ten powers and fearlessness. He also teaches to others what has been realized, it being true and not false; thus, it is said that he is one who speaks truth (T 1512, vol. 25: 840b13-16).

Looking here at the flow of the four-character string, “... it being true and not false; thus, ... 如實不虛, 故 ...,” is not in the form of *satyam amithyatvāt*, but we cannot overlook that this sort of expression is being used with respect to authoritative true speech. The absolute authority of the mantra seen at the end of the *Hṛdaya* is due to having realized that the teaching of *prajñāpāramitā* taught by the Tathāgata in the *Prajñāpāramitā* sūtras is true speech.

Hence, “It is true and not false; thus, the mantra of *prajñāpāramitā* is spoken,” or “*satyam amithyatvāt, prajñāpāramitāyām ukto mantraḥ*.” This is specifically a conclusively important part that links the central teaching of the *Hṛdaya* to the mantra at the end, but was it more likely to have been translated from Sanskrit to Chinese, or from Chinese to Sanskrit? Let us attempt to literally translate the Sanskrit into Chinese using the same approach as above.

sarvaduḥkha-praśamaṇaḥ, satyam amithyatvāt. prajñāpāramitāyām ukto mantraḥ.

一切 苦      能除      真實 不虛故(於) 般若波羅蜜多(中) 說    呪

「除除一切苦, 真實不虛故, 說於般若波羅蜜多呪 / 說般若波羅蜜多呪」 → 「能除一切苦, 真實不虛故, 說般若波羅蜜多呪」.

It is a fact that the *Hṛdaya* is unique, and Nattier's paper is significant with respect to the various cited examples of this. However, the assertion that “it is easier to understand the Sanskrit *Heart Sūtra* as a translation from Chinese than the reverse” is a mistake. Moreover, in addition to ignoring problematic places that fail to align with her theory, there are also several places observed in her paper in which the Sanskrit is translated into English so as to work well with her theory. As a result, Nattier's theory is untenable.

## Bibliography

- Conze, Edward. “The Heart Sutra.” In *Buddhist Wisdom Books*, 77–107. Northampton: George Allen & Unwin, 1958.
- Fujita Shindō 藤田真道. “*Hannya shingyō ryaku-bonpon no kenkyū*” 般若心経略梵本の研究. *Nihon bukkyōgaku kyōkai nenpō* 日本仏教学協会年報 12 (1940): 268–304.
- Fukui Fumimasa 福井文雅. *Hannya shingyō no sōgōteki kenkyū: rekishi, shakai, shiryō* 般若心経の総合的研究: 歴史・社会・資料. Tōkyō: Shunjūsha, 2000.
- Funayama Tōru 船山徹. *Butten ha dō kanyaku sareta no ka* 佛典はどう漢譯されたのか. Tōkyō: Iwanami Shoten, 2013.
- Harada Wasō 原田和宗. “*Hannya shingyō*” *seiritsushi-ron: Daijō Bukkyō to Mikkyō no kōsaro* 「般若心経」成立史論: 大乘仏教と密教の交差路. Tōkyō: Daizō Shuppan, 2010.
- Ishii Kōsei 石井公成. ““*Hannya shingyō*” wo meguru shomondai – Jan Nattier no Genjō sōsaku-

setsu wo utagau”『般若心経』をめぐる諸問題：ジャン・ナティエ氏の玄奘創作説を疑う. *Indogaku Bukkyōgaku kenkyū* 印度學佛教學研究 64, no. 1 (2015): 499–492.

Müller, Max and Bunyiu Nanjio [Nanjō Bun'yū 南條文雄], eds. and trans. “*Pragñā-pāramitā-hridaya-sūtra*.” In *Ancient Palm-Leaves*. Anecdota Oxiensia, Aryan Series, Vol. 1, pts. 1–3, 47–59. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1884.

Nakamura Hajime 中村元 and Kino Kazuyoshi 紀野一義. *Hannya shingyō Kongō hannya shingyō* 般若心経 金剛般若経. Tōkyō: Iwanami Shoten, 1960.

Nattier, Jan. “The *Heart Sūtra*: A Chinese Apocryphal Text?” *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 15, no. 2 (1992): 153–223.